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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses gender discrimination with regard to educational opportunity and outcomes in India. Although official statements promoting equity indicate awareness of the imbalances in this area, solutions, it is argued, lie not only in propagating new equitable educational practices but in political decisions that take into account existing longstanding social and political relationships. (JAM)

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India's Educational Policy - Moving into the 21st Century: Education for Equality with Specific Reference to Women

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ABSTRACT

India's educational policy - Moving into the 21st century:
Education for equality with specific reference to women

India's first national educational policy (1968) has envisaged a radical transformation of the education system. Despite considerable expansion, several problems, particularly in matters of equity have remained. Recognizing this, the new policy (1986) emphasises the removal of disparities and the need to equalize educational opprotunity in access as well as in conditions of success for women and other groups who have so far been denied a fair shake.

This paper argues that while the statements on education for women's equality indicate awareness of the constraints in this area, their mitigation lies not only in new methodologies but rather in making political decisions on existing structures and power relations.

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As a document the 1968 educational policy was a significant step in the history of education in post-independent India. But, by and large, the policy objectives of the Kothari Commission Report did not get implemented, and despite considerable expansion, it's stress on radical reconstruction is still unachieved after twenty-two years. So far as women are concerned, their literacy rates have increased from 7.9% in 1951 to 24.9% in 1981, the enrolment rate of girls rose from 64 lakhs in 1951 to 400 Lakhs in 1981. But overall, the condition of women in India has deteriorated: their work participation rates reduced from 27.9% in 1961 to 12.1% in 1971 till it reached 14.4% in 1981. The drop in rural areas was from 31.4% in 1961 to 13.4% in 1971 and 16.4% 8n 1981. Ninety percent

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of women in the workforce are in the unorganized sector. Only 18% of rural women are literate, and the numbers are 9% for Scheduled Castes and 7% Scheduled Tribe women. The marginalization of women is further evidenced by their declining sex ratio over the last eight years and their higher death rates. Several other disturbing trends indicate the devaluation of women in India.

Like the first education policy, the New Policy on Education (NPE) stresses the need for equalization of educational opportunities. It lays special emphasis on the removal of disparities on "those who have been denied equality so far" (NPE 4.1). "If we were to identify one section which is the most deprived from the point of view of education, it is the women, it is girls" said Rajiv Gandhi in April 1986 to the National Development Council on Education Policy. The two paragraphs on education for women's equality highlights the following:

- education as an agent of basic change in the status of women to neutralize accummulated distortions of the past
- the new educational system is to play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women
- by fostering development of new values through curriculum, textbooks, teacher training and administration
- developing women's studies
- removing obstacles to accommodate and help in the retention in elementary education
- employment for vocational education for girls where there should be no discrimination in professional, non-traditional occupations and in science and technology.

There are many good points about this document as in the previous document - the major one is the statement that education is a unique investment in the present and future. This implies a more central role to education as opposed

to the past where development planners treated education as a social welfare activity which had peripheral status in economic planning. Women's development has so far been linked to marginal welfare services because planners have relegated them to the peripheral sphere to be recipients of family welfare rather than participants in productive programs. The low priority given to education so far is evident in the 2.3% of budget allocated to education in the sixth plan despite the Kothari Commission recommendation of 6%. The seventh plan increased it to 3% and now the commitment is to reach 6%.

However, on a bid to enter the 21st century, NPE reoriented the educational system on the basis of modernization. The policy planners have failed to acknowledge that modernization as a process has often adversely affected women. As Maria Mies has pointed out the pauperization process that affected the smaller farmers in the green revolution displaced women from traditional agricultural occupations in the productive sphere to marginal subsistence and unemployment. Technological innovations have displaced women by mechanization of their jobs while their low productive jobs have not been mechanized.

Besides the question of how Policy of Action (POA) measures will be implemented, the major problem is that education is seen as a basic agent of change. What is the experience? POA admits that separately education has not been able to bring about equality for women. An important question is, what has the rapid expansion of education done for the status of women in Indian society? The role of education as a democratizing agent has been seriously questionned.

It is true that women are entering diverse fields of work, but the general picture indicates:

- great disparity: female literacy in Rajasthan is 12% while Kerala has 73% literate females
- the majority of illiterate women are in the rural areas
- urban middle-class women are the ones who have benefitted from educational

expansion. The reason that the female/male enrolment is narrowing rapidly in higher education is because class is an important determinant of educational opportunities for women, and higher education is confined to the urban upper and middle-classes.

- women still go into "feminine" fields of study with restricted job opportunities
- Importance is given in the new policy to vocationalization which does not remove the danger of ghettoization in "suitable" areas for women such as tailoring, secretarial work and handicrafts which offer less pay and fewer job opportunities
- the importance of science and technology for women does not take into account the fact that the unemployment rate among qualified women in science and technology is almost 50%
- Non-Formal Education (NFE) programs which were initiated to rectify the educational imbalance of rural women supported the patriarchal view of women's role as wife and mother and the subordinate role of women by providing them with training in female occupations such as health, nutrition and health care, and significantly ignoring the role of rural women in agriculture.

The framework is characterized by a centralized bureaucracy. Education is an important input in economic growth, that is, education for production, equality, and equal opportunity is thrown in basically to link with the industrial sector. The focus is on creating high quality for those who can make it for elite institution through meritrovracy and the rising class of rich farmers but by restructuring higher education it is delinking degrees with jobs not dealing with unemployment. The result is a highly inegalitarian system which neglects the special problems of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Has more education led to better jobs? The range of jobs opened to educated women widened both in the public and in the private spheres. But women's work

participation rate reduced from 27.9% in 1961 to 12.1% in 1971 and 14.4% in 1981, in the rural areas the figures are 31.4% in 1961 which dropped to 13.4% in 1971 but rose slightly to 16.4% in 1981.

The majority of women in the work force are in the unorganized sector (about 80% of whom are in agriculture) where they are beyond the reach of labour laws, have no job protection and are very oppressed.

Has educational expansion for women led to better status? There are several indications that for women, the process of change is going in the opposite direction to the goals of society in India. Reminist writers in India have repeatedly documented that the plight of women has further deteriorated. This is happening through a process of marginalization and devaluation.

Several factors, in addition to high female litteracy, declining work participation such as declining sex ratio over the last eight years, more recently amniocentesis, low life expectancy and higher mortality, as well as social evils such as the increasing encroachment of the dowry system, represent this devaluation. There are at least two negative effects which the spread of education has had for the status of women. First, upward mobility because of the education in the lower strata has caused a process of what M.N. Srinivas calls "Sanskritization". In this, the lower social groups adopt the lifestyles and sex role ideology of the dominant groups. Women's wage work is seen as inconsistent with their new status and the immurement of women takes place that is, they are withdrawn from active participation in agriculture, subjected to seclusion, and differential treatment regarding education, an increase in dowry and decrease in decision-making power. Secondly, social evils like dowry and other forms of oppression of women have escalated mostly among newly educated classes largely because of the rise in consumerism which is perpetuated through the media.

This leads us to the question of whether women's problems and struggle can

be insulated from broader social realities. Can the "empowerment of women" be done basically through education as NPE suggests? Can an educational system which maintains the power structure in society empower women? The central point of the document for women in the PROA indicates the parameters of empowerment (p.106)

- self-confidence
- critical thinking
- fostering decision-making
- equal participation in social change
- encouraging group action and developing skills for economic independence.

The struggle for education by women, particularly women of weaker sections, is basically linked to broader issues of social justice and deeper social realities of structural inequality in Indian society. NPE's strategy for women's empowerment is compensatory -- greater facility and change in attitudes. But the overall model remains exploitive of gender relations. NPE stresses values education: by focussing attention on a change in attitudes towards women through values and attitude change, it is once again rooting the sources of women's oppression on traditional attitudes and cultural instruments and deflecting attention from the socio-economic political structure. The government which controls education also controls a potent medium for socialization and education -- the T.V. which powerfully manipulates blatent and sustained negative biases in the portrayal of women on T.V. in all programs -- news, farming programs, art and entertainment, films, sports, development programs and children's programs. They perpetuate the image of women existing in the education and societal structure as submissive, dependent and brainless. As has been pointed out, a view of femininity as an ideal which developed during the nationalist period with the acceptance of a new patriarchy which was a product of middle-class culture and emulated by newly

educated classes. This new patriarchy bound women to a new, entirely legitimate, subordinate position which at the same time gave them rights. But the equality principle is rendered impotent within the narrow prospective of patriarchy. The redesigning of education has not been conceived of outside the prevalent views of femininity and women's role as wife and mother.

In a highly inegalitarian society, cleavages founded on class, caste, religion and gender conflict with policy rhetoric if that is not matched with structural change and seen within a framework of the larger socio-economic political reality in which they exist. For example, the question of why 60% of girls drop out of primary school cannot be remedied by more facilities. The answers lie in the fundamental structure of society. The empowerment of women in the face of patriarchical values, which define suitable roles for women and which inhibit their participation, cannot be achieved by education alone. Education is undoubtedly an important agent but the levers of power lie in the socio-economic sphere.

Conclusion

To qualify for the coveted entry into the 21st century, society must pay off large dues it owes to the masses of women in India. Education alone cannot intervene in the oppression of women which is rooted in history. Hard political decisions must be made to develop adequate and powerful instruments to break the resistance embedded in the structure of political and social organizations, the economy and hierarchical social values.